

Neutron bomb: Deterrent or new peril?

By William Hines

Sun-Times Bureau

WASHINGTON—Daniel Ellsberg of "Pentagon Papers" fame says that Presidents since Dwight D. Eisenhower have delegated to others authority to use atomic weapons, and that by now there may be hundreds of fingers on the button that could set off World War III.

The situation can only worsen if the controversial neutron bomb is deployed in Europe to deter possible Soviet aggression, Ellsberg said on a recent visit here. He is free on \$5,000 bond on charges arising from mass protests against the neutron bomb at Rocky Flats, Colo., where the weapon is scheduled to be manufactured.

Ellsberg said that, while a consultant in the John F. Kennedy administration, he was shown file copies of secret letters Eisenhower had sent to major overseas commanders in the 1950s spelling out circumstances under which they were authorized to use nuclear weapons without specific approval from him.

This authority remained in effect, to Ellsberg's personal knowledge, under Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, Ellsberg said. He

added that he had no inside information about arrangements under Richard M. Nixon, Gerald R. Ford or Jimmy Carter but indicated that he would be surprised if the authority had been rescinded by any of them.

A QUERY TO THE White House last week elicited a statement that "under existing law the President alone has the basic authority to order the use of nuclear weapons. This authority . . . may be delegated to subordinate officers in the chain of command virtually without limitation."

Whether such arrangements ever actually existed, or exist now, is "highly classified," The Sun-Times was told.

Ellsberg said one commander with this autonomy was Adm. Harry D. Felt, whose Pacific theater Ellsberg visited in 1961. The arrangement was needed, Ellsberg explained, because at the time communications between Washington and Hawaii were disrupted almost daily.

Disruptions were also a daily occurrence between Hawaii and the western Pacific, Ellsberg said, and while Felt's subordinates did not formally share his authority, many of them said they could envision circumstances under which they might feel obliged to unleash a nuclear punch without specific orders from above.

One such officer, Ellsberg said, commanded an isolated Air Force base close to the 38th Parallel in Korea. This man, a major, reportedly told Ellsberg that he would "scramble" his hydrogen H-bomb-carrying planes if he thought his base was under attack.

The major, Ellsberg related, acknowledged the possibility that one or more of the pilots might misunderstand procedures and fly on beyond the "fail-safe" line and drop a 1.1-megaton hydrogen bomb on a previously assigned target—thus inevitably starting World War III.

AFTER THIS PACIFIC tour, Ellsberg said, he returned to Washington and urged Kennedy's national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, to cancel the long-standing arrangements because "what you've got is not Harry Felt's finger on the button, but any number of majors' . . ."

The authorization was not rescinded, Ellsberg said, because in 1961, "just after the Bay of Pigs, it was not the time or the young naval lieutenant (Kennedy) to reverse the military decision of the great general (Eisenhower)." Johnson also allowed the authorization to remain in force, he said.

Bringing the problem up to date and into the context of the neutron bomb controversy, Ellsberg contended that field commanders in Europe would have to have standing authority because there would be no time to seek White House approval after Soviet tanks started rolling west.

The neutron bomb is a specially tailored weapon that supposedly emits relatively more energy as radiation and relatively less as blast than is the case with ordinary atomic bombs. Proponents see it as useful against a massed Soviet tank assault, which is assumed to be the form in which an invasion of western Europe would start.

BECAUSE A MASSED TANK attack would be carried out with great speed, quick reaction would be essential, Ellsberg pointed out. One who agrees is a Dutch military writer, Gen. P. H. von Meijenfildt, a Christian Democrat member of parliament, who has stated:

"Neutron bombs only have value for war if they can be used on a mass scale, and if power to use them first has been

given to the military commanders in time of peace. By that we would delegate the decision of stepping across the nuclear threshold and going on the way to self-destruction. If we do not want that—and we have good reason for not wanting it—then the introduction of these weapons makes no military sense."

Like von Meijenfildt, Ellsberg says the use of this weapon against Soviet military targets in western Europe, before other atomic weapons had been used, would inevitably evoke an all-out Russian response, triggering a counter-response by the United States leading to the end of civilization.

Two authoritative American writers have recently made similar points in articles on the neutron bomb, which they describe as an unjustifiable, self-defeating and expensive addition to the U.S. arsenal.

One is George B. Kistiakowsky, an early-A-bomb scientist

who was Eisenhower's science adviser and is now an emeritus professor of chemistry at Harvard. His article, "Enhanced Radiation Warheads, alias the Neutron Bomb," appeared in the May issue of Technology Review, a magazine published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

THE OTHER IS FRANK M. KAPLAN of the Arms Control Project at MIT's Center for International Studies, whose piece entitled "Enhanced-Radiation Weapons" is the lead article in May's Scientific American.

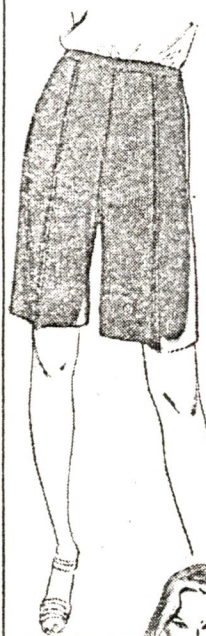
Kistiakowsky agrees with Ellsberg and von Meijenfildt that first use of the neutron bomb could provoke all-out retaliation.

Kaplan is of similar mind. In addition, he says, the neutron bomb is neither so sparing of innocent bystanders nor so destructive of invaders as it has been to be.



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